

Boundless, Abundant Color: A Conversation with Ilana Savdie

By María Elena Ortiz

Ilana Savdie paints colorful and seductive works in a constant state of flux, resulting in surreal compositions. Employing both abstraction and figuration, Savdie creates hallucinatory environments of loosely depicted figures; these arrangements are beautiful and uncanny representations that question the human body as a steady foundation. In her practice, she frees herself from traditional methods of figural representation and pursues an exploration of form that embodies the intersections of politics and abstraction. At times, one can recognize human body parts: heads, limbs, hands or breasts, often disguised by swathes of color and material textures. She combines familiar and unusual images that explore identity, and what she refers to as the “inconvenient body,” or one that does not abide by social, political, and racial norms.

Savdie was raised in Barranquilla, Colombia, a Caribbean city known for its *Carnaval* and multiculturalism. This sense of cultural richness is part of Savdie’s background; her mother migrated to Colombia from Venezuela, while her father is Lebanese and Jewish, born and raised in Egypt. As a child the vibrant colors, costumes, and masks of the





Carnaval de Barranquilla captivated her—images that would later inspire her paintings. The *Carnaval* is one of the biggest carnivals in the world, known for merging Spanish, African, and indigenous cultures. Submerged in this folkloric experience, Savdie was particularly interested in one carnival character of uncanny quality: *La Marimonda*. This persona, the ethos of the *Carnaval*, is costumed in a mask with a phallic quality that combines both primate and elephant elements. As a child the mask scared her, but also captivated her. As an adult, she acknowledged *La Marimonda's* history as a means by which the lower classes mock the oppressive elites. She became enamored with the cultural potential of *Carnaval* as a form of resistance.

At the age of 13, Savdie's family moved to Miami due to the economic recession and the impact of guerrilla war in Colombia. Although she was well aware of the complexities of class and social structure in Colombia, she was a Spanish speaker and a queer woman, with Middle Eastern and Jewish heritage, aware of what it meant for a body to exist as "inconvenient." All these layers of political and racial experiences that distinguish Latinx art in the US inform Savdie's work. As mentioned by Dr. Arlene Davila, Latinx artists "have everything to do with the racialized position they are forced to occupy; in addition, engaging with Latinx artists in their diversity and on their own terms poses a challenge to the white-centric spaces that dominate the contemporary art world."¹ Her impulse towards abstraction and loose figuration might perform as seductive; however, Savdie layers her works with symbolism that embodies a myriad of ideas.

Entrañadas comprises a new body of work of 13 paintings and a suite of 10 drawings. At first glance her paintings appear as elegant, pure, and beautiful abstract compositions of vibrant colors. Upon closer inspection of the energetic brushstrokes, one starts to recognize fragments of bodies in each curve of the color folds. Savdie's approach towards loose figuration makes one wonder if there are other bodies hidden in the composition. The energetic movement in the work can be traced to Savdie's keen study of the art historical canon, with subtle references to the contortion of the body and the opulence of 17th-century Baroque painting. In this exhibition, Savdie approaches abstraction through a marriage of history, identity, and political concepts.

Footnotes

1. Arlene Dávila, *Latinx Art: Artists, Markets, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), p.26



María Elena Ortiz: You often convey hallucinatory environments of bright, often acidic colors, loosely depicting figures that slip in and out of bodies. How do you represent the idea of identity as fluid, and how does that relate to history and memory?

Ilana Savdie: *I can begin talking about my background. I come from a family of multiple migrations; really no member of my family is born in the same country, down to my immediate family. I've always been immersed in contradiction and that's been a driving force behind my aesthetic interests. I'm really interested in the idea of a body that reorganizes itself. How does it locate home, history, heritage, and memory when it's deemed inconvenient or perverse, impure or unworthy? What does it mean to create a world of contradictions? How does that serve to empower identities? In my work I think of identities and figuration simultaneously, using the body to speak about identity, so this is an amalgamation of both.*

MEO: It's interesting that you use the word "contradiction," because for me, I use the word "fluidity."

IS: *Absolutely! I love the idea that something can be its opposite but also have a symbiotic relationship with it, so when things are not supposed to “coexist” they can also feed back into each other. Like something spilling or leaking into something else... they evolve into each other and then this idea of contradiction is something that can be dismantled.*

MEO: When I hear the word contradiction I think a lot about - “binary thinking,” which for me is a very American, or let’s use “Western,” approach to seeing the world. You layer colors and multiple histories that blur boundaries and reshape the porous limits of human form and identity.

IS: *I think a lot about what it means to traverse boundaries, to transgress. In the work there are, literally, nothing but boundaries, sharp lines that get interrupted, paths that get rerouted through mark, through gesture, through masking, through an organization of different forms that are constantly pushing up against each other. What does it mean to be confronted with something and treat it like a malleable thing that can be pushed and dented, really just bump up against it in the most violent way possible, and dissolve it in the process and then regain power from it? I like to think about how two things meet: how to create a seam, a joint, a link, and then these two things that are supposed to stop each other from existing form and bend, and become something else.*



A lot of this work has come from working instinctively. Rather than starting with an idea, I think about different things and find ways to move backwards. I collect a lot of images and screenshots of things that I don't know why I like, and organize them into folders. I try to categorize them, try to name them and go from there. My familial experience of migration, and how that has informed my aesthetic relationships, combined with the immediate response to the sources that I use is how I see the work and my interest in it.

MEO: I talk about identifying your own queerness in a very homogenous culture. I was raised in Puerto Rico, in Latin America, and like the US there's a lot nationalist discourse. In your case it's Colombia, where there's an idea of what a Colombian is. Did you fit into that category in an easy way?

IS: *Not at all. I grew up in a Catholic country, in a Jewish community within a Catholic country, so automatically there was a kind of removal. It was a Jewish community formed primarily by people who had escaped from Europe and the Middle East around WWII and arrived in Latin America. There were stories of exodus and expulsions that led to the creation of this community, as I knew it. Growing up as a queer person within that community, I felt even further removed. I was part of something but also removed from something, and that brought to existence the idea of contradiction. **I built my relationships to the environments around me through the language of contradiction, through an idea of a body that doesn't fit.***

Add to that this extremely tight and constricting definition of what woman means in these countries, where the standards of beauty are very specific. The space that women are supposed to take up is small, so things like excess, bigness and especially taking pride in that are not invited or welcomed. There's this sense of having to make yourself smaller that I think will eventually lead to another extreme: to come back around through the space of the grotesque. You end up feeling grotesque, and you end up relating to the grotesque. That experience absolutely impacted my relationship to this aesthetic.

MEO: I know those definitions of what a woman is, and though they're being challenged, they are still there... a kind of conservative approach. You present bodies that are still subscribed as non-normative with relation to race and gender. That's why a place like *Carnaval* becomes a moment where those boundaries are broken down and very much inform what you do.



IS: *I grew up in Barranquilla, where the carnival of Colombia happens every year. It is, I think, the second biggest carnival in the world. It's the three days before Lent, as most carnivals are, so it's meant to celebrate three days of festivities where you completely let loose before you deprive yourself of something for however long Lent is. For three days there's a complete inversion of social norms that only seems to happen in these extremely religious countries. The constriction of religion and of this conservative way of thinking gets uncrowned and undone in the three days of the Carnaval.*

MEO: Along with religion, *Carnaval* is also tied to slavery.

IS: *Absolutely. In colonized countries where the European practices bump up against those of the people they enslaved, it became a contradictory celebration. That is the epitome of the Latin American cultures, of antithetical things coexisting that aren't meant to coexist. Specifically, in the Colombian carnival there are a lot of costumes rooted in the mockery of oppressive elites, and they have evolved in meaning to become these celebratory figures. But if you trace back their oral history and carnival folklore you can trace it back to acts of resistance. They're acts of resistance through mockery, through the exaggeration of the body, and the grotesque. As a child I was really drawn to the ones that had exaggerated bodily responses. Really, all of them are sort of morbid and grotesque, and yet become these celebratory figures at the same time.*

My favorite has always been the mask that I've collected throughout the years, La Marimonda. It is a costume where the mask is made from a combination of a monkey and elephant, and it has a very phallic-looking face. As a child it horrified and fascinated me at the same time, and in hindsight it feels like a really queer response. I've collected these masks throughout the years and they have become the features that I now use in the paintings. I'm really interested in how they can be expressionless, but so full of body at the same time. Literally the eyes, nose, and mouth are made from the same tube-like structure that folds and feels strange and bodily. I like to find different ways of painting La Marimonda and different ways of hiding these features within the work.

MEO: Your works are personal explorations that combine unexpected forms, rich textures, and color that evoke questions on history and identity. I was wondering if you could talk more about queerness and contradiction?

IS: *To me, the idea of contradiction is contradictory. It's the idea that you can relate to but also have adverse feelings to. I think that's true of the queer experience. You grow up with something that is very much who you are, and also something you should be repulsed by, so that in itself is a contradictory feeling. There's something quite uncanny, quite beautiful, and fascinating that's worth excavating in the queer experience – this contradictory existence: the idea of existing within binaries, when binaries are absurd. Thinking about the absurdity, comedy, tragedy, and theatricality of that will always be something I mine in this work.*

*This work is very much about the transformative power of performance, environment as a stage for the body, and the body as a stage for more bodies. That's a literal way of thinking about performance. I think about the idea of performance within queerness, the identity of performing an identity. Everything that we talked about sounds like something that can be performed within, but also thinking about theatricality and the dramatization of something as a way of highlighting something else, to highlight its absurdity, to protest a resistance through the mockery of it. There's this feedback loop that I think of as a performance, everything from using materials that can perform something bodily, to using bodies that can perform other bodies. **Nothing in my paintings are human bodies, but everything is performing something corporeal to a certain extent.***

MEO: There are a lot of entry points in your work of queerness, performativity and theatricality, and a breaking down of barriers. There is an interest in the reinterpretation of the body as a potential framework for exploration of not only beauty, but also toxicity. You say the figures in your work are not really human, but there is this interest in figure within a very fantastical landscape. If they aren't human then what are they?

IS: *I wouldn't say they're not human, but they're not only human. I like to think, as a starting off point, of Gloria Anzaldua's question: "We are our own bodies, and we are all bodies that exist on us, so where do we end and another body starts?" That feels like an exciting access point to blow out boundaries. I think, where does the familiar end and the foreign, the alien, start? If we are our bodies and all the bodies that exist on us— also the organisms that threaten us, the parasites, the viruses – if we are the germs that we spit out, if six feet apart from another person is the safe distance where things that expel end and others start as we've been told throughout this whole pandemic, if that's the length of space, then are we that entire space? Is that our relationship to each other?*



1. Image of the Damselfly penis, coloured SEM. Courtesy of Science Photo Library

I look to a lot of microscopic photography (figure 1), which I think is really exciting as an aesthetic. At one point I was really interested in the amoebic body, the shape-shifting body, and using that to start forms that imagine the behavior of formlessness within a body. I've also been interested in the concept of the parasite as an invasive being. There's this idea of good and evil that gets brought up: Is it biologically inherent in the parasite to invade the host to survive? Can the parasite be blamed for it? I am fascinated by the inherent idea of good and evil. In order to look at a parasite I looked at a lot of microscopic photography. I really enjoyed playing with these microscopic things, scaling them up or having them coexist with the more human figures that come from my drawings.

There is also an overwhelming sense of being taken over as a social body. At one point during the four years of our last president we had this small group that kind of invaded and took over our social body. Something felt invasive about all that, a loss of control to a smaller entity. I became interested in the idea of the coup, or the invasion, but quickly I had to dismantle that language because I realized that the same language was used against us. "We are the invaders, we are the ones that destroy this social body, and we are the ones that destroy it from within." I started to shift into the idea of the layers between good and evil, between parasite and host. I thought about the behavior of a social entity that changes from within. If you think about it as something to celebrate, it can be something really powerful and exciting.

MEO: The blended bodies and parasites produce an energetic, tense, and intoxicating environment. Though you were inspired by the social impact of the coup to consider ideas surrounding infiltration and infection, I'm interested in your embrace of the qualities of the dyed beeswax— an organic material— to create a dominating sense of instability in the picture plane. I was wondering if you had more to say about how all these concepts feed practically into the way you handle the medium?

IS: *I usually begin with a drawing that comes entirely from memory and then I start looking to other sources. It's pretty human figurative. That gets translated into a work on paper. I let things like water tension decide the shape of something that was formerly an outline drawing. All of a sudden this figure shifts into another figure because that's how the water spilled, and that's how the paint travels. Then it becomes about connecting and moving ink across the page. I translate that into a digital sketch where I bring in color and I play with collage. That becomes the sketch I use for the painting.*





3. Francisco de Goya, *Witches' Flight*, c. 1798, oil on canvas. Courtesy of Museo del Prado

*There are a lot of decisions that I make about the different applications of paint that will translate translated moments in the sketches. When I start to make the painting it becomes about deciding how big do I want this mark to be. Is it going to be only one mark? Am I going to use my entire shoulder to make it, or is it going to be something I do with my wrist? I think about which joint I use to make marks on a painting. There's this way of connecting my body to the bodies I'm working on. There are a lot of spills in the painting where I let water or paint travel and dictate form. I'll literally put the canvas on the floor and spill paint and let that dictate part of the composition. There are a lot of things that are true to the original sketch and a lot that happen because of the nature of the material I'm working with. Sometimes I feel absurd when I talk about the painting being of the body. **I think most paintings are of the body because we're in it as we're making it. It reminds me that I exist and I take up space; I have gravity and it weighs me down... all of that becomes part of how the decisions get made.***

MEO: In works like *Brutal of you to parade in carne trémula* (figure 2) you sourced figurative elements from Francisco de Goya's *Witches in Flight* (1798) (figure 3)- but translate them through your own creation of loosely rendered figures in which the bodies are boundless, in flux, almost floating within an abstract composition. How does your approach to art historical contexts, materiality, and images spark a dialogue between representations of the human figure in the Western canon and expand on it through the inclusion of other voices and bodies?

IS: *The way I think about paint is similar to how I look at art historical sources. There is no singular way that I look at bodies in paintings. I love making things coexist that aren't supposed to coexist. I think that's true for most of art history. For example, I love pulling out a small aspect of a Baroque religious painting and have it share space with an application of wax that is really bodily. I like the idea of excess and splendor in Baroque paintings. I love bringing that into that work and then destroying it a little bit.*

I get really excited about the potentiality of body language as it is employed in those Baroque compositions. Performative and emotive aspects of the human condition are related through positions of the body. Figures relate to each other in the choreography within the picture plane, like in a Rubens painting. I love using that as a way to make a body travel within a work where there's no expression or lighting condition that will make the drama otherwise. I also use other art historical sources that point specifically to something else. For

2. detail: Ilana Savdie, *Brutal of you to parade in carne trémula*, 2021, oil, acrylic, and beeswax on canvas stretched on panel



4. Lynda Benglis, *Embryo II*, 1967, purified and pigmented beeswax, damar resin, and gesso on masonite, Courtesy of Museum of Modern Art

example, I think about how Lynda Benglis' work with wax became a really influential point of reference for me (figure 4).

MEO: How does your focus on materiality continue the conceptual themes found in Feminist art, Minimalism, and Post-minimalism? How are these artistic movements embedded in form?

IS: *I look to a lot of different artists and I don't limit. I like to work instinctively. There are a lot of figures based on me and my own body, and I like to draw and paint them by feeling my sides and thinking about how they feel. I paint them from memory rather than looking at a source, and then I look at a source. I think that's how I similarly look to art historical sources; some things come out instinctively, other gaps are filled by going to art historical sources.*

For example, I know that there's a really strong relationship to how the body is reformed in my work and surrealist painting. I come from Colombia, from Barranquilla, where Gabriel Garcia Marquez is from, where magic realism is from—so this kind of relationship to the not real coexisting with the real is definitely feeding back into it. Ignoring the extremely misogynistic history of a lot of these movements, the idea of being in a constant state of flux, and the absurdity of trying to stay intact is a driving force in the way I think of this work.

I think about translation and language a lot, and how language is always shifting. You know the absurdity of attempting to categorize when nothing is static. I think that's the relationship a lot of Latin people have to the term "Latin" or "Latinx". The continent itself is not static, the people aren't; we migrate, we shift, we evolve, and we absorb our environments and become different things, so being categorized feels like a boundary.

MEO: This new body of work celebrates painting as a vehicle for bodily transformation. It embraces the delightful, the weird, and inconvenient. In the paintings there is always a moment that is a bit satirical and ironic. Perhaps you can expand on that a little bit?

IS: *That's one of the essential aspects of the Carnival. Through satire and mockery the resistance happens, the defiance of norms happens, the retelling of histories happens. These satirical moments happen through exaggeration, but they do happen. I like that as a concept. In the paintings I love taking the severity out of something by giving it a quirky little moment, having a stopping point to laugh at*

the situation and point to its absurdity. Not the absurd like “nothing matters,” but the absurd as in the impossibility of the conditions that we create for ourselves through binaries that are forced upon ourselves. We’re not binary beings, we don’t exist in binary states, so to impose them is an absurd concept. And I love comedy as an entry point to the absurd. A lot of the figures in the works, at some point, have been sourced from cartoons. I’ll use cartoons as part of comedy and satire, and I think about how mimicry is a form of defiance and resistance. Mocking it as a way of protesting, and that dictates a lot of this work. It’s something that is prevalent in the Carnaval, where a lot of these things meet for me.

MEO: Is there a painting in the show that has your favorite quirky moment?

IS: *I think there’s one that I’m still really excited about which is in *Brutal of you to parade in carne trémula* (figure 5). I placed a little eye in the top right of the painting that suddenly made the entire painting become a mask. It felt really funny and dumb to do that. It made the severity of this painting laughable to me. It’s the idea of parading in a trembling flesh that made a very severe thing funny.*

MEO: One thing we haven’t talked about is color and texture. When I see color like this I feel like, “maybe she grew up close to the Caribbean!” Close to the equator you see a lot of color, and then the colors of the *Carnaval*, and then Miami, which is a very colorful place. Is that accurate or too reductive?



5. detail: Ilana Savdie, *Brutal of you to parade in carne trémula*, 2021, oil, acrylic, and beeswax on canvas stretched on panel

IS: *I hear all the time from artists of color, especially from Latin descent that the art could not be too colorful, especially for people close to the Caribbean! It's actually something that I suppressed for a long time. Finally, I let the color that felt instinctive come out, letting myself go as far as I wanted with color and seeing when I was ready to pull back. I haven't found that limit yet. It's been more exciting to give you the color in excess, in a way that feels almost like an attack—actually forcing you, the viewer, to look at a parasite by seducing you with color!*

Regarding texture, I let myself respond instinctively to the material. There's a lot of play in how I relate to it. I really enjoy the way it feels, like it's reminiscent of something bodily. It has the translucency of a membrane or skin. The beeswax for me became an entry point into the experience of being both seduced and repelled by something of the body. I apply wax how I apply paint, which means the gesture builds into this texture. This texture has a reptilian, fleshy, organic kind of alien and human; it can be a microscopic photograph of cracked skin and it can also be this landscape or coral reef. I relate to content physically. I'll literally be touching a material and thinking about how it feels. The way I relate to texture in the work, in large part, is about making materials behave like something else. A lot of it is about making the seductive and repulsive sit next to each other, the way I think it does for how we relate intimately to each other as humans, as animals.

MEO: Last question for you Ilana about the title of the exhibition. I know that *entrañas* means insides. What is *Entrañadas*?

IS: *I looked into a lot of definitions. I looked to *entrañas* as a noun in Spanish that translates to guts and viscera. It's also used to mean the essential, the intimate, the hidden, and the center. It's the bowels that digest the food to absorb the nutrients to expel waste. *Entrañar* is a verb in Spanish it means to implicate or to hold within, to introduce the deepest within, and to unite the most profound, intimate. Then, I was really interested how in English *entrañar* means embowel, and disembowel means the same thing—two opposing terms actually mean the same thing. It means to remove bowels, to take the inside out, to remove its internal organs to understand it. The title *Entrañadas* is a word that doesn't exist. It pulls together words that do exist through all of their plays of language. The idea of building something from its interior out and, in my mind, building its own utopia, building its own gods, building its own icons out of its entrails.*

